

Swarthmore College

## Works

---

Philosophy Faculty Works

Philosophy

---

1-1-2004

### Listening To The Evidence

Hugh Lacey

*Swarthmore College*, [hlacey1@swarthmore.edu](mailto:hlacey1@swarthmore.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to these works benefits you](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Hugh Lacey. (2004). "Listening To The Evidence". *Towards A Classless Society: Studies In Literature, History, And Politics In Honor Of Thompson Bradley*. 213-226.

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy/219>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact [myworks@swarthmore.edu](mailto:myworks@swarthmore.edu).

## Listening to the Evidence\*

... the least that human courtesy can do is  
to listen to the evidence.

(W. E. B. du Bois, 1903)

Is there a place for community-based learning in the curriculum of the liberal arts college? Can service activities in the community be integrated into research projects and courses of study in ways that enhance or that even may be required for the gaining of understanding? (Similar questions can be asked about political organizing and other activities in the community. Here I focus on service.) If so, concerning what phenomena and under what conditions; and can that place be established in such a way that service does not become treated simply as a means to gaining understanding (and fulfilling other objectives of the college), and that understanding does not become subordinated either to service itself or to those moral virtues that supposedly may be cultivated by engaging in service?

I will address these questions in a limited way with a focus on urban poverty in the contemporary U.S.A. In doing so I assume that one of the core tasks of the liberal arts college is to gain and to disseminate understanding of significant social phenomena, those phenomena from which no lives are isolated and response to which largely defines the moral character of the times. This means to participate, and to prepare students to participate, in the cultural and value debates that serve to define the sort of society in which we aspire to live. In our times urban poverty and its attendant phenomena, and the way in which their forms are being reshaped by programs of "welfare reform," are among the key morally significant social phenomena.

---

\* This article represents views and arguments developed in discussions with colleagues working in the Chester-Swarthmore College Community Coalition during the mid-1990s, especially Thompson Bradley, Maurice Eldridge, and members of the public housing community in Chester. It is a considerably rewritten version of H. Lacey, "Listening to the Evidence: Service Activity and Understanding Social Phenomena," in *Beyond the Tower: Concepts and Models for Service Learning in Philosophy*, ed. C. D. Lisman and I. Harvey (Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education, 2000), 53–68, and it is used here with the permission of the organizing editor of this volume.

Welfare reform has been driven by a mode of understanding urban poverty, apparently widely shared across the mainstream political spectrum, which may be summarized as follows. In the first place, the current condition of the poor represents a state of dependency on government that has reinforced numerous vices that entrap the poor in a "culture of poverty": laziness, avoidance of work, violence, criminality and other forms of social destructiveness, irresponsible sexual, child-bearing, and child-raising habits, drug use, absence of personal initiative and lack of preparedness to make use of opportunities, being manipulative in blaming their condition on racism and playing on feelings of guilt among the well-off. Secondly, on balance, recent government programs on behalf of the poor represent a net harm—in some versions, because they could not be efficacious since the causes of poverty are not social or structural, but rather located in alleged individual attributes such as low intelligence and genetically based proneness to violence. Thirdly, government spending for programs targeted to alleviate poverty represents a burden or even an injustice towards the middle class taxpayer. Thence, fourthly, possibilities for empowerment of the poor require policies, legislation and programs that will impel them towards "self sufficiency" and "taking responsibility for their own lives."

Diagnoses and prescriptions like these have dominated the public and legislative debate on welfare reform. How sound are they? It seems obvious that support for them, if they are proposed responsibly, should be empirically well grounded, that it would derive from experiential contact with the phenomenon. Oddly enough, this truism tends to be ignored. Although the proponents of welfare reform tend to display remarkable certitude when talking about poor people and the appropriate means to bring about reform, few of them have had close contact with any poor people or any sort of on-going dialogue with them. Their evidence draws from inquiries on the poor conducted at a distance, through the mediation of statistical reports and a battery of anecdotes, without communication with the reflective experiences and tested agency of the poor themselves.

In 1903 W. E. B. du Bois wrote: "We must not forget that most Americans answer all queries regarding the Negro a priori, and that the least that human courtesy can do is to listen to the evidence."<sup>1</sup> The point applies as much to the poor as to "the Negro," who are often one and the same person. Things have not changed much in a century; the voices of the poor themselves are largely absent from the public debate. Little effort has been made to find out how poor people characterize themselves, how they diagnose the causes of their condition, how they express their hopes, and how they identify and articulate the possibilities that they consider

---

<sup>1</sup> W. E. B. du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (New York: New American Library, 1982), 130.

worthy of their aspiration. "The evidence" is not being much listened to. The poor tend not to be seen as parties to developing the "solution" to the "problem" that they, their behavior, their traits and their communities are perceived to constitute.

Moreover, the certitude of those who offer these diagnoses and prescriptions is reflected in the kind of language they use: often harsh, punitive, scornful, humiliating, coercive, "tough" and disengaged, dominated by appeal to a "realism" that does not recognize any viable possibilities outside of the framework of its core certainties and that is more responsive to the realities of power than to the fruits of careful, systematic, empirical inquiry. This "realism" is framed at the moment by more encompassing certitudes (additional "a priori's") such as the value of the free market, private control of capital, downscaled government and enhanced realms of private initiatives, and the "naturalness" of prioritizing self interest.<sup>2</sup> This is not a language in which dialogue could be conducted with poor people. Absent is any sense of mercy, love (except "tough love"), compassion, solidarity, brother and sisterhood, sacrifice for the sake of the common good, and any sense that our lives are all intertwined. No doubt they are absent because they do not figure in the equations and calculations of "realism." Could it be that there is a connection between the certitude of diagnosis and the harshness of language, so that the "a priori" is grounded in the preparedness to use power (and the institutions of violence, e.g., prisons) to ensure compliance with the tenets of "realism?" Or perhaps it is grounded in the widespread tendency to replace the full exploration of the causal nexus of poverty with the premature (and morally righteous) assignment of responsibilities for the failure to eliminate its pathologies.

## Understanding

The remarks above merely express some impressions and polemical comments on the welfare reform debate. They provide a context for raising the questions: What is it to gain understanding of a social phenomenon like urban poverty in the U.S. today? How is that understanding gained and how should it be gained? What should be the criteria for appraising it? How is "listening to the evidence" related to these criteria? What might we find out if we did listen, and how must we be placed and what must we do in order to listen? With what idiom must we transcribe the evidence and how can we learn it? What possibilities (if any) unrecognized in mainstream discourse, and what varieties of them, are there in the communities of poor people to be identified and nurtured?

---

<sup>2</sup> See H. Lacey, "Neutrality in the Social Sciences," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 27 (1997): 213-41.

Understanding of a significant social phenomenon has three interacting components: those that describe, explain and encapsulate the possibilities allowed by it.<sup>3</sup> It involves, in the first place, a comprehensive descriptive charting of the phenomenon, and of the agents whose lives are part of it, including accounts of its variations, differences, conflicts and current tendencies. Adequate charting is sensitive not only to all of the dimensions, concreteness, historicity and particularity of the phenomenon as well as to relevant statistical data, not only to the sufferings and pathologies that have brought it to mainstream attention as a "problem," but also to the unrealized anticipations of and proposals for furthering hope and transformation present within it.

Understanding involves, secondly, historical-sociological-psychological analyses of how the phenomenon has been shaped and maintained, including analyses of the social and material conditions, mechanisms and regularities of the various modes of life that the structures which frame the phenomena allow (and require), and of the interactions and structural relations among these modes of life. This provides the background for assessing and appraising the relative importance of the various factors (natural, individual, behavioral, cultural, institutional, structural—and their interactions with one another) that have made causal contributions to the phenomenon, recognizing that explanatory adequacy requires that attention be given to all the detail charted descriptively.

Thirdly, gaining understanding involves attempts to diagnose what the range of future possibilities may be, including those for fundamental transformation, given the conditions and constraints provided by the present phenomena and the structures that frame them; and to identify what practices, what alliances with other people and institutions, and what transforming of institutions and structures would be necessary to bring some of these possibilities to realization (and what are the impediments to this happening). Crucial here is the recognition that on the one hand the currently predominant structures, their regularities and tendencies significantly constrain the range of future possibilities; but on the other hand that there are genuine possibilities, realized in anticipatory forms in the marginal spaces of these structures, which may be able to gain the conditions to develop.

Certain kinds of service activities (to be specified below) can play useful roles in the processes of gaining understanding of phenomena such as urban poverty. My argument (which is far from exhaustive) will focus on the question of the possibilities encapsulated in the phenomenon of ur-

---

<sup>3</sup> H. Lacey, "Notes on the Dialectic of Truth and Justice," in B. Schwartz, ed. *Educating for Social Responsibility in a Multicultural World*, The Swarthmore Papers 1 (1993), 107–16; idem, *Is Science Value Free? Values and Scientific Understanding* (London: Routledge, 1999), chap. 5.

ban poverty. I emphasize that understanding cannot be reduced to description and explanation; it also involves encapsulation of future possibilities which, in turn, cannot be reduced to prediction which (in the social sciences) can only be successful under stable structural conditions.<sup>4</sup> It is important to pursue the question of future possibilities in a disciplined and empirical way that avoids simultaneously the pitfalls of ideology (accepting the inevitability of the tendencies of the status quo as defined by actual relations of power) and illusion (fueled by a value-driven voluntarism, deriving possibilities from what one deems desirable). While sound understanding is opposed to both ideology and illusion, it is not uninformed by values.<sup>5</sup> From values one cannot derive what is genuinely possible, but values can attune us to realms of possibilities that are worthy of investigation. Moreover, in human affairs certain possibilities can be realized only if there are people who hold certain values, who desire that those possibilities be realized, and who are motivated to act to bring them to realization.<sup>6</sup>

Any human phenomenon can afford myriad possibilities, since it involves (among other things) the actions of intentional agents and relations among them, and it is open to transformation in the light of reshaping the relations and interactions among any number and variety of individuals and social institutions. (Service activities of members of the liberal arts college, for example, become part of the phenomenon of urban poverty.) Not all genuine possibilities can be realized, for the conditions required for the realization of some may preclude those of others. Furthermore, since the investigation of social possibilities itself requires material resources and social conditions, not all genuine social possibilities and the means towards their possible realization can be investigated. We cannot expect to be able to develop theories in which all genuine possibilities will be encapsulated. In order to investigate future possibilities, a selection of the kinds of possibilities of interest must be made, a selection which will reflect a value commitment, even if the selection made is just to investigate the trajectory of actual structures and predominant tendencies.<sup>7</sup> When we turn to a phenomenon like contemporary urban poverty, however, understanding is seriously incomplete (incommensurate with urban poverty being one of the phenomena to which response largely defines the moral character of our times) if it does not identify possibilities (if there

---

<sup>4</sup> Lacey, "Neutrality in the Social Sciences."

<sup>5</sup> Lacey, *Is Science Value Free?*

<sup>6</sup> H. Lacey and B. Schwartz, "The Formation and Transformation of Values," in *The Philosophy of Psychology*, ed. W. O'Donohue and R. F. Kitchener (London: Sage, 1996), 321–40.

<sup>7</sup> Lacey, "Neutrality in the Social Sciences"; idem, *Is Science Value Free?* chaps. 8–10.



are any) for the lessening of the suffering (in all of its dimensions) experienced by the poor and for the transformation of their condition so that possibilities for human flourishing become more realizable for them, and if it does not identify the social processes and the institutions that might serve to bring these possibilities to realization; or if it does not explain (with explanations that have been well tested empirically) why no possibilities for transformation are available.

Thus, if we want to understand poverty, we need to address: Do the tendencies and regularities of current structures open up (or prevent) possibilities of expanded well being for those who are poor and suffering (without diminishing those of others)? Would alternative social arrangements, aspired to in movements for social change in poor communities and present in anticipatory forms among them, offer greater possibilities for enhanced well being? Could modifications of current structures, and transformations of its institutions, provide space that would enable the legitimate aspirations of the poor to come to realization?

### Evidence

How can questions like these be investigated in a systematic and empirically-grounded way—without presupposing “a priori” that reigning structures and only they can incorporate all future possibilities worth aspiring to,<sup>8</sup> or without making presuppositions tailored to fit our hopes and desires, while still recognizing both that future possibilities are constrained (not determined) by prevailing structures, powers and conceptions of well being (as well as by psychological, natural and ecological factors), and that what the future will become depends largely on the agency and choices of human beings interacting together? Answering this question in a comprehensive way is beyond the scope of this article. I focus on an important detail. What should count as evidence when addressing questions like those raised in the previous paragraph?

Relevant evidence obviously includes reports of the sufferings and the pathologies of the poor communities as presented in the usual demographic and statistical analyses, and data relevant to getting at the micro mechanisms underlying them. Not so often recognized, it also includes detailed accounts of the phenomenon as it is experienced by members of the communities themselves (since we wish to investigate alternative possibilities that may be germinating in the communities), of the concrete daily experience of members of the community, their histories, struggles and achievements, opportunities, values, knowledge, visions and images of hope, motivations, practical ideas, leaders, alliances and affiliations, budding initiatives, frustrated previous efforts, programs for transformation;

---

<sup>8</sup> Lacey, “Neutrality in the Social Sciences.”

and of interpretations of their condition, of ongoing events, of whom (persons and institutions) they trust and distrust, and why. The latter kind of evidence cannot be gained without contact—extended, multi-faceted, and involving considerable listening and dialogue—with those who experience the phenomena of poverty.

### Service

How can the appropriate contact be obtained? One way is through carefully designed projects of service, and often that is the only way practically open to students and other personnel at liberal arts colleges. Other ways would include living or working in a poor community, organizing politically in it, or participating in its religious life. Obviously the poor themselves have the contact simply by virtue of being members of the communities. That is why reflective testimony of the experience of the poor made by poor people themselves has an authority that is not readily discounted; nor, of course, is it the last word on an issue. Service, as such, is not sufficient, for it may be performed while making very little contact with the experience and context of the lives of the poor, and with little understanding of the conditions that must be in place for service to be effective. Under certain conditions it may even hinder gaining understanding of the possibilities of transformation.

To be able to provide the appropriate contact, service activities normally should be part of a well planned set of programs, where the activities and programs embody the following four interacting levels (first stated in Lacey, Bradley, and Eldridge, "The Chester-Swarthmore College Community Coalition"):

- Each of the programs and activities has value by itself by virtue of its attempting to address a need identified by community members in an urban poor neighborhood—bringing resources, skills, training, and above all knowledge and the capability to generate knowledge into the community.
- They are integrated in a process of comprehensive community-wide (and, where possible, broader social) change—building institutions that all participants will share—directed towards goals established in collaboration with the community members.
- They are carried out at sites where students and others can perform community service that has been approved by the community and that is subject to ongoing supervision and evaluation; and where efforts are made to foster discussion and interaction between community members and those engaged in the service activities, to nurture respect and friendships, and to explore together further forms of collaboration.



- They are conducted with a spirit of reciprocity, with all involved conceiving what they are doing as part of a common task whose goals are important for all of them. College personnel, community residents, and representatives of other public, private and community organizations conceive themselves as working together for the same goals while playing different roles. The college personnel are not helpers or providers, but accompany and participate in the process of social change for the long haul, aiming, among other things, to create a new kind of institution of learning in which poor people can participate integrally and from which they can gain knowledge and research to inform their projects for social change.<sup>9</sup>

The four levels interact, and all are essential if the service activity is to provide the kind of contact that locates one adequately for gaining evidence of the kind described above, while not treating service to the poor simply as a means to ends held by various college personnel. Service alters the phenomenon. Ideally it becomes part of the means to bringing about social change of the kind desired by the community members, and at the same time to bringing about transformations in the structures of learning and research in the college. In the light of the four levels, projects are conceived and designed so as to re-shape the social relations between investigator and investigated, between college and community, so that the college keeps its core tasks in the foreground, the community is served, and interactions are conducted with the various parties to them being considered and treated as agents, participants in a shared enterprise. Where all the levels are in place, programs of service become (in part) tests of certain types of possibilities of social transformation: e.g., the possibility of shaping social institutions (the college, for instance) so as to exhibit the widest possible inclusiveness, diversity of perspectives, visions and people, where there is special attention to including those currently excluded or neglected. Then, appraisal of their success and progress (or failure) is itself a partial provider of relevant evidence about what future possibilities may be.

My point is a very simple one and, if one holds that claims to understand should be submitted to the tribunal of broadly empirical criteria, a quite obvious one: understanding the phenomenon of poverty requires experiential contact with it, and projects of service—structured in the way outlined—can provide the opportunity to have that contact. The contact, of course, does not provide the understanding, but the occasion for gaining the evidence to bring to bear in gaining understanding. Thus, projects of

---

<sup>9</sup> H. Lacey, T. Bradley, and M. Eldridge, "The Chester-Swarthmore College Community Coalition: Linking Projects for Community Empowerment in a Public Housing Development with a College's Academic and Outreach Programs," *Universities and Community Schools* 4 (1994): 41–49.

service of these kinds can play useful roles in connection with one of the fundamental tasks of the liberal arts college, provided that they are accompanied by careful and systematic reflection, by the further study, analysis and research necessary for the formation and testing of the understanding that has been generated, and by systematic and critical interaction with other research and literature in the field. When our objective is to gain understanding, working in the community is no substitute for theoretical analysis and critique; it may be essential, however, to put us into contact with indispensable evidence against which the prevailing theories should be tested.

### Integrating Service into a Course

While my point is simple, the conditions proposed above are not easy to implement. So it is fair to ask whether the general argument can actually give rise to concrete implementations. What actual difference in what is understood is made by engaging in these service practices? I cannot answer this in a general or in a conclusive way. By way of a partial (even oblique) answer let me offer some reflections on how an obligatory service component affected discussions in a class I gave in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences that was devoted to investigating methodologies of the study of poverty.<sup>10</sup> Most of the students were involved in weekly tutorial activities in the community center of a public housing development in Chester, PA (a small city located a few miles from Swarthmore); they had opportunities to talk with adults from the community, and occasionally some of them attended community meetings. The following is a list of some of the ways in which directed reflection on and discussion of the service activity enhanced the philosophical discussion of the class.

1. It provided a rich context for the discussion of observation, particularly of how observation may or not be a function of such factors as what one is looking for, one's personal history, one's location, what one is doing, how one is interacting with people, one's expectations and one's cultural background. When students compared their own observations of the community center and events happening in it with those of their fellow students, with those of the community members, and with those of public housing officials, they were struck by differences (on occasion, even contradictions); and so the issue of the objectivity (or not) of observation in the social sciences became an immediate and concrete issue.

---

<sup>10</sup> For the syllabus, bibliography, and other details of the course, see Lacey, "Methodologies of the Study of Poverty," in *Service-Learning: Linking Academics and the Community*, ed. J. W. Eby (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Campus Compact, 1995), 139–47.

2. What is the phenomenon of poverty that social science aims to understand, and the public policy makers want to redress? Is poverty (and its attendant phenomena, e.g., racism and abuse of women) just a problem? Is it also a site for hope, struggle and novel possibilities? How does one's characterization of poverty interact with one's social values and commitments about programs to transform the condition of the poor? How is poverty experienced by the poor themselves, how is their experience relevant to how one characterizes poverty, and what sort of language do they use to describe it? Engaged contact with the phenomenon seemed to attune the students to the ways in which social science studies (and the public discussion about welfare reform) tend to presuppose (a priori) answers to such questions, and so raised sharply the questions about evidence that are central to this article.
3. What is, and what ought to be, the relevance of local knowledge, (including local history) to understanding the phenomenon of poverty, to public policy formation, and to the decision making processes of public authorities? The students quickly became aware that the residents know a great deal that they themselves do not know, and would not come to know except through organized contact with the residents: e.g., about (in our case) Chester and its history, about the public housing development, about the hopes, visions and motivations of the residents as well as about their sufferings and frustrations, and about their struggle (and sometimes organized efforts) to create a better life, especially for their children. This experience, in turn, raises critical questions about the "privilege" that tends to be granted to knowledge gained in the social sciences. What (if anything) grounds the privilege of "scientifically generated" knowledge? Does it properly displace local knowledge when we seek comprehensive understanding and the grounding of the social values that shape public policy? How, e.g., might local knowledge provide relevant evidence for testing the assumptions about "dependency" that inform the welfare reform debate?
4. Questions about certain social science methodologies can be raised in novel ways. Concerning ethnographic studies, e.g., what are we to say of the reliability of a study if its subjects disagree with it? This question is sharpened when one can discuss with the subjects the reasons for their disagreement. The general adequacy of quantitative methods can be raised, too, especially when students hear articulate residents characterize the community's condition with emphasis on concepts like "brokenness" rather than measures like low income or unemployment rate. "Brokenness" is used by Ella Thompson, a resident of and organizer in Chester public housing who was, for many years, co-chair of the Chester-Swarthmore Col-

lege Community Coalition, to characterize the core sufferings experienced by and within the community: brokenness of personal lives, brokenness of relations among residents, brokenness from the life of the city and public affairs, which must be "healed" if the cycle of despair and violence is to be overcome. And the students become likely to move beyond the statistics about how many children finish their schooling and begin to ask about the motivations and motivation-formation processes of those who do and those who do not.

5. The students recognized (some of) the residents as vital agents, people with an interest in developing themselves and transforming their community, whose leaders have their own ideas about how to go about doing so—and a history of attempts, with some successes and some failures, to implement their ideas. They also observed the public housing authorities developing a plan to relocate residents without holding discussions with them and without taking into consideration their forcefully articulated objections and alternative proposals. In short, the authorities were ignoring the residents' agency (knowledge, understanding, values, and aspirations), thus acting on the basis of an understanding of who the residents are that is not faithful to reality. The students also became aware that, in the ongoing debate about welfare reform, welfare recipients have in general not been invited to participate, thus perceiving it as a debate that presupposes that it is appropriate to make far-reaching decisions about the lives of poor people without engaging them in the process. This provided a context for asking how to investigate a group while simultaneously recognizing the agency, proper to human beings, of its members. Also, how can public policy be developed in ways that respect the agency of poor people, rather than treating them as objects for whose lives decisions are made in accordance with what "experts" and "authorities" think is good for them? What sort of social science do we pursue when we take these questions seriously? This raises the potential salience of "participant action" research, and the centrality of interpretive methods that attempt to understand actions, habits, motives and predispositions as springing from agents' self-understandings.
6. What is the range of possibilities afforded by current realities? Are these possibilities fully framed by what can be done within prevailing socioeconomic structures in accordance with current dominant tendencies? The students met residents who aspire to different, novel possibilities in which the community would exercise control over itself and become an active agent in public affairs (as was clear in their conflict with the housing authorities). The aspirations are often expressed in a language that involves interesting

twists in the use of commonplace terms. Where "empowerment," typically implying strong individualist connotations, is often used to express the objective of welfare reform, community residents speak instead of aspiring to "community empowerment:"

... it aims for the sharing of responsibilities and for community transformation, rather than encouraging individuals to 'get out', just to cope, to live with lowered expectancies, to accept submissively the dependency that can accompany welfare [or the directives of the welfare reform agents]; it aims to motivate community members to participate actively and authoritatively in the process of community transformation so that they have a genuine choice: to construct a fulfilling life in their own community, or to follow some other path. Community empowerment is thus part of a process of social transformation that is grounded in democratic means, and that at the same time enhances the expression of democracy. It puts democracy ahead of efficiency, the considered judgment of community leaders ahead of the generalizations and assessments of possibility of social analysts, and community involvement ahead of programs designed and implemented by outside experts. It builds the conditions for genuine democratic decision-making at the community level so that the community members become active agents and decision-makers in the process of change, and do not become reduced to recipients of aid, the goals and programs of which are determined by outside agencies. It holds that the authority for determining what is good for the community lies—in the final analysis, after appropriate dialogue with agencies that wish to offer services and with due consideration given to the experiences of other communities—with the community members themselves.<sup>11</sup>

Are the residents' alternatives genuine possibilities, or merely idle, rhetorical gestures conjured up out of despair?

How (an instance of my central question) does one deploy empirical evidence to answer this question? There is virtually no philosophical literature that addresses this matter of evidence concerning claims about future possibilities, yet I believe that it is the most urgent epistemological issue facing us today.<sup>12</sup> One of the major achievements of the course was that the abstract question, "Are there genuine alternative possibilities afforded by current realities?" became converted into the concrete one, "Do the

<sup>11</sup> Lacey, Bradley, and Eldridge, "The Chester-Swarthmore College Community Coalition," 45; Ngina Lythcott contributed to this formulation.

<sup>12</sup> See Lacey, "Neutrality in the Social Sciences."



residents' alternative proposals represent genuine possibilities?" That question is open to a measure of empirical investigation: by ongoing observation of the unfolding of their proposals (and of the obstacles they face), of their being turned into a series of concrete projects for addressing needs, of their gradually bringing about recognizable changes in the community that the residents recognize as positive, and of their becoming linked institutionally with the projects and structures of other groups and institutions (including colleges) so that they begin to obtain the structural conditions for permanent maintenance and growth. The last consideration here also turns attention to the link between transformation of the condition of the poor and the transformation of major societal institutions, including colleges. One component of service activities is that friendships may be established among community and university personnel; such friendships can be the source of motivation for institutional change.

7. Contact with the phenomenon of poverty engenders a strong sense both of the complexity of problems and of the tenuousness of opportunity, as well as a realization of the presence of resistance and struggle. To understand the phenomenon, one must grasp the full causal nexus—the macro and micro causal factors: the structural, interpersonal, and behavioral, matters of public policy and personal responsibility and initiative—and gaining such understanding cannot properly ignore the input derived from the perspective of poor people themselves. Transformation of the condition of the poor requires both structural and personal transformation in dialectical interaction. There are no “quick fixes”; there is no one (principal) type of causal factor that has only to be changed for transformation to ensue. Awareness of such complexity tends to move one away from using explanatory analysis as a means for assigning blame or moral responsibility. Frequently the public debate is more about who is to blame for the pathologies of poverty, and who is responsible for initiating and funding solutions, than it is about understanding the phenomenon as it is, and what could be done to transform it. While I do not think that the social sciences can be value-free,<sup>13</sup> I think it is a profound error to confuse explanatory analysis with the assignment of blame, and to remove from the causal account factors that one thinks ought not be changed (e.g., private control of capital) because of considerations of rights. (It is also an error to predict disastrous consequences simply from what one judges to be morally ill-motivated policies. The possibilities afforded by the moment are always more encompassing

<sup>13</sup> Lacey, “Neutrality in the Social Sciences.”



than what can be grasped by "a priori" or "moralistic" analysis.) Responsibility can be exercised in a variety of ways (depending on who one is and where one is located); when we look to the full causal nexus, it becomes possible to discern where one can make constructive interventions in order to exercise one's own responsibility—and different people and institutions may be better suited to make interventions in different places and ways.

### Concluding Remarks

My conclusions are modest. In order to understand certain phenomena (e.g., urban poverty) one must draw upon appropriate contact with the phenomena, and service activities may provide the vehicle for this contact. The difficult part is to design the service activities and their place within a curricular structure so that they do in fact contribute to the gaining of understanding. No general epistemological argument about service as a possible vehicle for gaining the appropriate contact with the phenomenon can justify failure to scrutinize the empirical record of successes and failures of programs of community based learning. Sound epistemology cannot be simply operationalized into sound pedagogy. Attention must also be paid to the limitations of any effort to implement community based learning. In connection with my own course, it became clear that a one-semester contact is not enough to gain a good grasp of things. Short term contact, even supplemented by a few interviews with residents, is not enough. A longer term interaction, with multiple phases and multiple dimensions, involving participation in several courses or research projects clearly would be conducive to nurturing greater interpretive abilities and also be more consistent with the fourth level of collaboration listed above. Gaining the institutional conditions required for such longer term interaction remains an ongoing problem.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, the approach that I have presented remains exploratory, and its conclusions provisional. Despite these qualifications, it seems clear to me that if we can learn how to "listen to the evidence," and to incorporate what we "hear" in our efforts to understand the morally significant social phenomena of our times, we will indeed be constructing a path that avoids the twin pitfalls of ideology and illusion. That provides the ground for including community based learning in the curriculum of the liberal arts college.

---

<sup>14</sup> Lacey, "Notes on the Dialectic of Truth and Justice."